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ABSTRACT

In 1992, the English Department of Florence-Darlington Technical College, in South Carolina, initiated a freshman composition program utilizing computer word processing in a full-term writing workshop format. The program includes 12 to 16 sections of English 101 taught in classrooms containing 22 networked computers, while software consists of WordPerfect 5.1 and an electronic dictionary. The program was based on the need to incorporate viable technical skills into humanities instruction and ensure that students graduate with written communication skills. Other aspects of the program include the following: (1) every student in every degree program must take the course, receiving a minimum of 45 hours of experience writing on a computer under tutorial supervision; (2) every student receives individualized instruction focusing upon his or her unique strengths and weaknesses; (3) every student is engaged in the continuous process of revision, thus generating better quality writing; (4) the teacher is able to read and comment upon each essay several times; (5) since students prepare and submit assignments on a continuous basis, individual learning paces are possible; (6) the teachers spend very little time talking about writing, and students spend almost all their time actually writing; and (7) instruction can also be included in information access/use and writing skills required by the job-search process. While this approach is a departure from traditional pedagogy, the computer facilitates students' creative thought process, while the program addresses students' tangible and educational needs. (KP)

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Freshman Composition and the Computer -- Total Immersion

by: George W. Whitaker

[paper presented to Community College Humanities Association National Conference, Nov. 1995]

I. Introduction

In 1992 the English Department of Florence-Darlington Technical College initiated and developed a freshman composition program utilizing computer word processing in a full-term writing workshop methodology, with a class size of 18-22 students for maximum tutorial effectiveness and peer interaction.

What brought about the adoption of this methodology was our recognition of the information and technology intensive world into which our students are being hurled headlong, and the belief that it is a responsibility of us in the humanities (at the heart of which is the proficiency in one's native language) to see that they land on their feet. This is what is charged us by our mission to provide our students a "comprehensive technical education." This methodology has been in full implementation since Fall 1994.

All English 101 sections (12-16/term) are taught in classrooms containing 22 networked IBM or Digital pc's (plus an additional pc with a wall-mounted 42" monitor for instructor's use in

illustration or group editing). Students currently use WordPerfect 5.1. Random House Webster's Electronic Dictionary is loaded as a TSR program for immediate reference. We make no use of interactive software. The classroom is remarkably "low-tech" -- students are sitting at computer writing, the teacher is tutoring; this is a full-course of what is commonly called a "writing lab." (A small victory was achieved recently when the class scheduling office ceased identifying the rooms in which we teach as "labs" and began designating them simply as classrooms.)

II. Philosophical Rationale

We in the humanities know that humanistic studies have always been the core of education, long before the study of technology and job skills; a truly educated person possesses an in-depth knowledge of his language, culture, and philosophy so that he can appreciate the quality of his existence. Today, however, there is another essential component to education: knowledge and skills which allow the viability of one's existence. (This is the "accountability" that the public and legislators demand.) A major factor in a student's having this viability for the 21st century is his understanding and use of technology. Not only must we humanities teachers accept this reality, we must not miss an opportunity (we must "rethink" the humanities). We can teach our students to use technology as a primary tool in their initial and continuing growth as people who can make a living and who appreciate the qualities of being human. By incorporating technology in our teaching, at the

core of our methodology, we teach our students to become the determinants of how the world is going to be, to see technology as something which expands human potential rather than substitutes for it, which enhances the thought process rather than cripples it, and which demands of an individual a stronger value system than has ever been required of him before. Our students may come to us wanting a degree; we intend to give them an education. A technology-based freshman composition program is the first step, and, by providing the technological foundation for 21st century communications, becomes the backbone of both the technologies and the humanities.

III. Pragmatics (from a technical college perspective)

(1) Almost without exception, the number one skill demanded by prospective employers of college graduates is Communication Skills, especially written, professional communication skills.

(2) Almost without exception, the reason most people progress above entry level employment into positions of more responsibility is that they possess the ability to observe, gather information, analyze, and communicate.

(3) Almost without exception, employers are asking us to send them graduates who are not merely trained for entry-level positions, but who possess more than a single skill, however technologically sophisticated -- people who are not merely trained but educated. The writing process is a seminal step in the thinking (i.e., educational) process.

(4) Like it or not, with the advent of the personal computer, mass communication, and information accessibility, technology will be forever intertwined with communication skills, professionally and personally. The need for literacy increases in direct proportion to the proliferation of technology.

(5) Like it or not, although writing will remain in many ways a personal endeavor, peer participation and collaboration, especially utilizing technology, will increasingly become a major factor in the generation of ideas and communication. (Based upon my observations of students working together in the classroom, teamwork seems instinctive to many people.)

IV. Practice

Ours is not a traditional "lecture, talk about what we read, then write an essay" approach, but a conference approach, a widely accepted and successful method (Donald Murray, Roger Garrison, et al) of teaching the writing process. Ours is a program which recognizes and meets the primary verbal need of our students at this point in their educational process, which is to be given the opportunity, through non-stop practice, to develop fundamental communication skills required for success academically and professionally (since very few of them, either recent high-school graduates or older students, have been provided this by their previous educational experience).

The method of teaching English 101 at this college allows the following:

(1) Every student in every degree program takes English 101. Every student receiving a degree from this institution has sat, under tutorial supervision, for a minimum of 45 hours in front of a computer developing and organizing ideas into written words.

(2) As he writes, every student in English 101 receives individualized instruction focusing upon his or her unique strengths & weaknesses. The course is totally process oriented, reflecting the philosophy that writing itself is a process -- an entire set of activities to accomplish an objective.

(3) Every student composing at a computer is engaged in the continuous process of revision, thus generating better quality writing, mechanically and organizationally.

(4) Since every student is under constant tutorial supervision as he writes, the teacher is able to read and comment upon his essay several times, not just once. (Aside: When a student has trouble with his writing, where does teacher of traditional approach send him? To a "writing lab" for individual tutoring. That's what we do from the beginning.) And the teacher is assured that the student's work is the student's work; he has seen him create it.

(5) Since students receive, prepare, and submit assignments on a continuous basis, individual learning paces are possible with this methodology, as is the opportunity for better students to pursue in greater depth the initial idea of the assignment. The teacher does not have to "teach to the lowest level," a complaint

often echoed in traditional education.

(6) The teachers of our program spend very little time talking about writing; thus, the students spend almost all their time in the course actually writing.

(7) We have also discovered that instruction in two other essential skills can be incorporated into the course: information access and use, and the writing skills required by the job-search process, which will be a life-long necessity for today's graduates. (In addition to a resume/cover-letter unit, other writing assignments often stipulate that citations from the Internet or an electronic database be included in the essay.) The course provides us the opportunity to teach not only the basic rhetorical principles but the practical, immediately useful writing skills every graduate must have.

V. Hurdles

Philosophical objections to this methodology come not surprisingly from those teachers of the traditional literature/humanities-based approach, which involved reading, class discussion, critical thinking, and analysis. I have also encountered the assumption on the part of some of these critics that the writing assignments in our course do not reflect "higher-order" thinking skills and thus the course is shallow. (In actuality, the course methodology allows unlimited felxibility in approach. Whether a teacher emphasizes introspective narrative in an assignment on becoming conscious of adulthood; insight into the

human condition, as in defining the changing role of women in a technological society; or organizational pattern in an assignment comparing and contrasting electronic troubleshooting techniques, the writing is far removed from "My Trip to the Beach.")

Of course, writing is more than merely an organizational or grammatical skill, and certainly more than mere machine operation. It is the manifestation of thought processes. This is not sacrificed by our not following the traditional pedagogy. The computer is a major player in the teaching process; the student himself is the other. I've had my initial doubts, but they disappeared when I began to see my students generating ideas and revealing insights, prompted by carefully designed assignments and guided by individual tutoring on my part and help from their peers as they work. The computer is the facilitator in this process, on-site, and continuously. English 101 is a different kind of English 101 than once-upon-a-time in a four-year college; but it is not a shallow English 101, and it is an English 101 firmly rooted in the realities of today. It is amazing to see how students realize the thought-potential in themselves as they create at the computer. You should experience it in person. And the fact that this is perhaps the first time in history that students have the extrinsic motivation that writing skills will "help them" in life, doesn't hurt, either. I owe some debt of gratitude to the computer for this.

There are obvious financial constraints to the establishment

of this program, primarily the approximately $50,000.00 needed to set up a classroom (excluding the cost of a LAN server, if desired). There must also be sufficient English faculty to maintain a class size of 20-22 students per section, as well as support personnel. Funding limitations often bring about a questioning of methodology; thus, an intense "sales job" (or influx of grant money) will be necessary to convince the college of the immense return on its investment in terms of quality and accountability of its instruction.

I do miss the reading and class discussion of literature and introduction of humanistic concepts in English 101 (still the practice, however, of English 102). But things aren't like when we went to school. This is not the old way; this is a better way. I have taught both ways. I have practiced theories of composition. For me, these were abstractions, understood by and relevant to only a few students, and I now believe that for fifteen years of my teaching I wasn't really doing most of my students much good.

The freshman composition program described -- by its incorporating technology as the backbone of its methodology, its addressing students' tangible, educational needs, and its accountability to this college's mission -- is at last a "real" humanities course for the technologies.